

Theresa Kulpinski has been selected as the 2016 Coconino First Things First Champion for Young Children.

The award is given to local champions who actively volunteer their time to raise public awareness of the importance of early childhood development and health. Champions spend a significant amount of time volunteering with FTF and building public awareness about the importance of early childhood issues.

Kulpinski engaged in awareness-raising efforts such as:

- Dedicating her volunteer time to serve as the chair of the Alliance for Children's Early Success.
- Helping organize and support early childhood fairs during Week of the Young Child in communities across northern Arizona.
- Attending awareness building trainings on early childhood messaging and always seeking out ways to advance her understanding of early childhood health and development.
- Recruiting her staff and parents in her programs to share the messages and early childhood fact sheets to build support for strengthening children and families.



We recently caught up with Kulpinski, who is the Program Manager for the Coconino County Public Health Services District Arizona Nutrition Network.

Question: Why do you feel early childhood development and health is so important?

Answer: They go hand in hand. We want our children to be strong physically, mentally, and emotionally. Good health, comprised of nutrition and physical activity, have a long lasting effect on brains and bodies that are still developing. Research shows that overweight children are more likely to become overweight adults. As adults, we need to provide our youth with good nutrition and physical activity opportunities throughout the day to meet their growing needs. Improving brain function, alertness, and creativity are just some of the side effects of eating healthy and being physically active. It also helps reduce the stress that increases cortisol which is damaging to kids brains; stress that might be caused by, for example, a child being overweight.

Q: What caused you to get involved in efforts to increase public awareness in early childhood issues?

A: I have been involved with children even when I was a child! I started babysitting at a young age and was a counselor from middle school through college teaching basketball, swimming, gymnastics, working with Girl Scouts. You name it. I graduated from Trenton State College in the field of Physical Education, Recreation and Dance and have been teaching ever since. My career consists of teaching PE in elementary school through high school; starting a home-based child care center to spend time with my children during their early years; working for City of Flagstaff Parks and Recreation hosting sporting events for kids and adults; and now working with the Arizona Nutrition Network program with Coconino County Public Health Services District, serving everyone from pregnant moms to senior citizens. Throughout each of my careers, the favorite part of my job is the collaborations I have with other organizations that want to promote early childhood and share the same message.

Q: Why do you feel building awareness in early childhood and developmental health is so important for families and communities?

A: Raising a family is a difficult thing to do, no matter what your economic status is. As a community, we want our children to succeed. Thankfully, Flagstaff provides a plethora of resources that our families and communities have access to, exposing our children to opportunities that generate learning to increase overall wellness of our community. Building awareness of the importance of early childhood and developmental health will give our children the jumpstart they need to be successful in life.

Q: How have you seen awareness for the early years change in your community?

A: Over the years, I have seen more collaboration among organizations, which in turn has increased the success of many events getting their resources into the community. Also, with new nutrition and physical activity standards instated for early child care centers and local education agencies, we are hoping to see results among our children with increased test scores and decreasing the risk for our children being overweight.

Q: How do you suggest other people in your community get involved?

A: Volunteering is one of the most valuable ways to get involved. Flagstaff is rich with opportunities to be involved in every aspect of a child's life and to promote healthy living within our community. Be a positive role model for our youth to learn from by example. Demand healthier food options and more physical activity opportunities where you live, work, and play. Together we can create the healthy community that we want to live in.